

Getting around by train, plane and foot

French 2 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: In French you travel en train, en voiture, en avion (enclosed vehicles) but à pied, à vélo, à moto (on foot or astride). For places, use à with cities, en with feminine countries, au with masculine ones and aux with plural ones. A one-way ticket is un aller simple; a round trip is un aller-retour.

Level: French 2 (high school, ACTFL Novice High) · **Standards:** ACTFL Novice High, WL 1.1 Interpersonal, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational, WL 2.1 Cultural Practices

How do you say which transportation you use?

Most French transport phrases follow one pattern. Use en for vehicles that you get inside, and à for things you ride on top of or move with your own body.

en

en train · en bus
en avion · en voiture
en métro · en taxi

you sit inside

à

à pied · à vélo
à moto · à cheval

on foot or astride

En for vehicles you enter, à for feet and things you ride.

Examples

Léonie va à Annecy **en** train. — Léonie is going to Annecy by train.

Mes cousins vont au collège **à** vélo. — My cousins go to school by bike.

How do you say you are going to a city or a country?

Prepositions with places

Cities and most islands take à. Countries take en if feminine or if the name begins with a vowel, au if masculine, aux if plural.

Type	Example
city	à Lausanne, à Tahiti
feminine country	en Belgique, en Suisse
vowel country	en Algérie, en Israël
masculine country	au Canada, au Sénégal
plural country	aux États-Unis

How do you buy a train ticket?

At the station, you go to le guichet (ticket window) or le distributeur (machine). The key phrases are un aller simple (one way) and un aller-retour (round trip). Then you find your quai (platform) or voie (track) on the board.

BILLET DE TRAIN · aller simple

Départ : Lyon · 08 h 42

Arrivée : Marseille · 10 h 55

Voiture 5 · place 32 · 2e classe

Prix : 38,50 €

A one-way ticket. Notice the 24-hour times.

The verb for riding any public transport is prendre: je prends, tu prends, il prend, nous prenons, vous prenez, ils prennent.

At the ticket window: — Un aller-retour pour Bordeaux, s'il vous plaît. — Pour quel jour ? — Vendredi, le train de 17 h 20. — A round-trip ticket to Bordeaux, please. — For which day? — Friday, the 5:20 p.m. train.

At the airport you will see l'enregistrement (check-in), la carte d'embarquement (boarding pass), la porte (gate), la valise (suitcase), le vol (flight) and la douane (customs).

Common mistake

English speakers say "to France" and want à France. Use en France. And "by plane" is en avion, never par avion for a trip.

Culture note

On some regional lines, a paper ticket must be stamped in a small machine on the platform (composter) before you board, or you can be fined.

Zoé's tip

Check the country's gender with its last letter: names ending in -e are almost always feminine (la Tunisie), so they take en. Le Mexique is a famous exception.

Key points to remember

- Use en for vehicles you sit inside (en bus, en métro) and à for pied, vélo and moto.
- Cities take à (à Dakar); feminine countries take en (en Belgique); masculine ones take au (au Canada); plural ones take aux (aux États-Unis).
- Un aller simple is one way; un aller-retour is a round trip.
- Prendre is irregular: je prends, tu prends, il prend, nous prenons, vous prenez, ils prennent.
- French train and plane times are announced in the 24-hour clock: 18 h 15, not 6:15 p.m.

Getting Around by Train, Plane and Foot: frequently asked questions

When do you use en and when do you use à with transportation?

Use en for vehicles you get inside: en train, en bus, en voiture, en avion. Use à for things you ride on or do with your body: à pied, à vélo, à moto, à cheval.

What is the difference between aller simple and aller-retour?

Un aller simple is a one-way ticket. Un aller-retour is a round trip that includes the return journey. Say it to the agent at the guichet or choose it on the machine.

How do you say 'in' or 'to' with countries in French?

Use en for feminine countries and countries starting with a vowel (en Italie, en Irak), au for masculine ones (au Japon), and aux for plural ones (aux Pays-Bas). Cities take à.

How is the verb prendre conjugated?

Prendre is irregular: je prends, tu prends, il prend, nous prenons, vous prenez, ils prennent. It is used for trains, buses, planes and taxis: je prends le train.

How are train times said in France?

French timetables and station announcements use the 24-hour clock, written with the word h: 14 h 05 or 21 h 40. Subtract 12 to get the afternoon time you know.